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WKU president talks economic development, college affordability with Rotary Club

AARON MUDD amudd@bgdailynews.com 44 min ago



WKU President Timothy Caboni speaks to the Rotary Club on Wednesday, January 30, 2019, at Bowling Green Country Club. (Austin Anthony/photo@bgdailynews.com)

Austin Anthony

College affordability and economic development were just a few of the topics Western Kentucky University President Timothy Caboni discussed with the Bowling Green Rotary Club on Wednesday during the group's weekly meeting.

As the final speaker in a monthlong series spotlighting local education leaders, Caboni shared a long-term vision for the university to become a hub for economic development and opportunity, especially for low-income students.

“You should be able to come to WKU. You should be able to graduate in four years, and you should be able to go get the job and build the life you want for you and your family here in our community,” Caboni said.

The university has several initiatives underway to make that possible, Caboni said, including the new WKU Opportunity Fund.

“We’re going to raise \$50 million to help young people whose families don’t have the resources to pay for college come to WKU and graduate,” he said, adding the university also wants to contain costs for students.

As the university battles declining enrollment, Caboni said WKU will look across state lines to recruit students.

“We are an hour north of the hottest city in the country,” he said, adding WKU is stepping up recruitment efforts in the Nashville area.

Once those new students are here, Caboni said WKU wants to give them more reasons to stay. That includes developing a new freshman village on the south end of campus.

The project involves replacing Bemis Lawrence Hall and Barnes-Campbell Hall with new “pod-style” residence halls by 2021. The concept features smaller sets of rooms sharing common spaces such as bathrooms or lounges.

Along with the new housing, a large parking lot near Pearce-Ford Tower would be converted to green space with the displaced parking moving to land the university owns on the 1400 block of Park and High streets.

Caboni said the new residence halls will emphasize living learning communities, which allow students studying similar subjects to live and work together.

“Instead of young people spending time in their rooms, they spend time together in a community,” he said.

A separate project to create a WKU Commons in Helm Library would create a space for students to have a meal and collaborate together, Caboni said.

Caboni said the project is made possible by the university’s 20-year dining services contract with Aramark.

As a result of the contract, commuter students are now automatically charged for an alternative declining balance meal plan if they don’t select one of the university’s more traditional and expensive plans.

For \$150 a semester, the Flex Plan includes dining discounts and flex dollars that roll over from semester to semester and year to year. The plan offers an average of \$9.37 per week through an account connected to a student's campus ID. More information about the plan is available at www.wku.edu/wkurg/dbdollars.php.

Caboni said the university wants to help keep students in Bowling Green after they graduate. That includes developing an “Innovation Campus” at the university’s Center for Research and Development on Nashville Road.

“When I talk about an Innovation Campus the question I’m asking us is how do we create the opportunity for investors, for venture capital, for businesses ... to create a space for them all to come together,” to innovate, Caboni said.

“We got to do everything we can as a community to keep those young people here,” he said. “That means we need the jobs that they want to do.”

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Aaron Mudd

Education reporter. Covers education and related issues, focusing primarily on the Bowling Green and Warren County public school districts and Western Kentucky University.